

In My Own House

Sylvia stood in the aisle, momentarily disorientated. Mother was not in her usual place. Sylvia's appearances in church were not that frequent in the past few years since she had moved into her own apartment. It was not far from home, just round the corner in fact and she was still able to call in to her mother twice a week. The break for independence had been necessary, especially after Jim married. She and Jim had been close for as long as she could remember and everyone assumed they would marry in time. That was the problem Sylvia realised too late. Mother's 'in time' meant in *her* time. There had never been any pressure. It had never been talked about, but Sylvia felt she had to stay for her. Jim had got tired of waiting and rebounded into a relationship with Laura. Their marriage lasted just months and then Jim had been annoyed when Sylvia refused to continue where they had left off. He kept trying, but Sylvia stubbornly refused all his attentions.

She picked out the mop of grey-white hair. It was only in recent years mother had given up her hat for Sunday church, and as for changing her seat! Sylvia stood a little longer, taking in the rear view of the slim, casually dressed man sitting next to her mother before going back into the vestibule to come in again by the other aisle and take the empty seat beside her.

Mrs. Roberts smiled. 'This is Peter', she leaned back to introduce him. 'You remember. I told you about him.' Sylvia did remember something about him. She thought back to a moment some weeks before when she was washing the kitchen floor, and while remembering she took in the gaunt face, sunken eyes and close cropped blonde head. She just had time to nod to him before the service began. Singing words with no meaning, she recalled her mother telling her how this young man had started coming to the church. No-one had taken much notice of him because he was 'different', and, partly as a protest, she had befriended him and sat with him in the services.

After this morning's service, Sylvia talked briefly with her mother, but Peter hovered, and, embarrassed by his presence, she excused herself. 'I must catch Julia. I haven't seen her for ages.' Sylvia would have been hard pressed to explain how she felt about Peter. Her mother was just being kind to a stranger. Why shouldn't she? It was a good thing and so like her. She could hear her father, who never had much time for church, saying, 'There's more Christian spirit in your mother than most of that other church lot rolled together.' Yet, somehow, Sylvia still felt put out, as though this man was taking her place.

She was more justified in her thinking when a couple of weeks later, she called at her mother's and found Peter there. Even more disturbing was her mother's animation, even in the way she poured the tea. Peter was more talkative this time, but Sylvia did not readily respond and left her mother to chat to him while she sat and listened to stories of their family life.

'I'll go and wash the dishes,' she said eventually.

'There's no need,' mother replied. 'Peter's done that for me. He said he'll have to get used to it if he decides to move in.'

Peter caught Sylvia's open-mouthed stare. 'Yes. Your mother's asked if I'd like to be her lodger.'

Sylvia restrained herself from any comment then but called again next day. Her face betrayed a sleepless night. 'But you don't know him,' she argued. 'He could rob you.' Her mother listened patiently, but then became annoyed as Sylvia ranted on.

'I think I know him well enough to trust him. He hasn't any family of his own, and he'll pay for his room. It'll be good to have someone in the house again.' She stopped, realising Sylvia would take that the wrong way, then added, 'You have your own life now. If you'd married Jim you could have moved away and I would be here on my own.'

'But I didn't!' Sylvia was hurt, and knew she was wasting her time.

It was Jim who brought matters to a head. Some weeks after Peter moved in Sylvia had called to see her mother. She could not hide her feelings towards Peter and as usual he took himself out while she was visiting. 'You don't have to go,' her mother told him. 'I've some shopping to do,' he replied. Sylvia followed him to the front gate. She wanted to say she didn't mind him being there, but before she could speak a car horn sounded behind her. She turned and Peter strode off. The car stopped beside her and Jim leaned across to the open passenger window. 'What's he doing here?' he nodded towards Peter who was just turning the corner.

'Mum's new lodger,' Sylvia told him. Jim looked shocked. 'You know he's done time,' don't you? A bit of a pervert I think. Drugs. Gay too I'll bet.' Jim seemed to have some strange pleasure in imparting this information. 'Hope she doesn't regret it.' A car horn sounded behind him and he had to drive on.

Sylvia wasted no time. 'I've just seen Jim. He says Peter's been in prison.'
'Yes, I know.'

'How could you? Don't you know the risk you're taking?'

Her mother told her to sit down. Her voice was stern in a way Sylvia remembered from childhood. 'Listen to me. How could I? How could I be kind? How could I show love to someone who'd almost forgotten what it means to care? How could I do my bit to try to lift someone out of the gutter? Listen Sylvia, you have your life now and I'm pleased for you. This is still your home, you're still my daughter and I love you just as much as I've ever done. Don't be jealous. It's my life and my love, and if I want to take a risk to help someone, that's my choice.'

Sylvia did not argue, but she still felt hurt, resentful and angry. Consequently her visits became fewer during the following weeks and, naturally she felt guilt when her mother fell on the stairs and was taken to hospital with a cracked hip. She had to admit that Peter being in the house saved her a great deal of work, time and worry. When she called though, the atmosphere between them was still strained. Peter seemed almost afraid to be there with her. Sylvia wanted to thank him, but the opportunity never seemed to come.

Then one evening she was visiting her mother in the hospital, when Peter appeared with a large bunch of flowers. He laid the flowers down, looked at Sylvia and said, 'I'll come in again.'

Before he could go, Sylvia, impulsively touched his arm. 'No, Peter, stay.' She smiled at him, hardly recognising her own voice as she said, 'You're family now.'

She suspected she saw a tear as he answered, 'You know, that's all I ever want. Nothing else.'

And so it was that next Sunday, Sylvia once more hesitated in the aisle. Peter was in his usual seat, alone. She walked forward to take her mother's place beside him.